

MID DEVON DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of a **MEETING** of the **HOMES POLICY DEVELOPMENT GROUP** held on 31 May 2022 at 2.15 pm

Present

Councillors

R J Dolley (Chairman)
G Barnell, J Cairney, S J Clist, D R Coren
and S Pugh

Apologies

Councillors

J Bartlett, P J Heal and R F Radford

Also Present

Councillors

R Evans and S J Penny

Also Present

Officers

Stephen Walford (Chief Executive), Karen Trickey (District Solicitor and Monitoring Officer), Simon Newcombe (Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing), Matthew Page (Corporate Manager for People, Governance and Waste), Claire Fry (Housing Services Operations Manager), Paul Deal (Corporate Manager for Finance), Mike Lowman (Building Services Operations Manager), Nicola Cuskeran (Interim Corporate Performance Manager & Safeguarding Officer), Sarah Lees (Member Services Officer) and Jessica Watts (Member Services Apprentice)

1 ELECTION OF CHAIRMAN (CHAIRMAN OF THE COUNCIL IN THE CHAIR FOR THIS ITEM ONLY)

RESOLVED that Cllr R J Dolley be elected as the Chairman of the Homes Policy Development Group for the municipal year 2022/2023.

2 ELECTION OF VICE CHAIRMAN

RESOLVED that Cllr D R Coren be elected as the Vice Chairman of the Homes Policy Development Group for the municipal year 2022/2023.

3 APOLOGIES AND SUBSTITUTE MEMBERS

Apologies were received from Cllrs: J Bartlett, P J Heal and R F Radford.

4 PUBLIC QUESTION TIME

There were no members of the public present and none had registered to ask a question in advance.

5 **DECLARATION OF INTERESTS UNDER THE CODE OF CONDUCT**

No interests were declared under this item.

6 **MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting held on 15 March 2022 were approved as a correct record of the meeting and signed by the Chairman.

7 **CHAIRMAN'S ANNOUNCEMENTS**

The Chairman had no announcements to make.

8 **START TIME OF MEETINGS FOR 2022/2023**

It was **AGREED** that the start time for meetings for the remainder of the municipal year continue to be at 2.15pm on Tuesday afternoons.

9 **REVENUE AND CAPITAL OUTTURN REPORT FOR 2021 - 2022 (00:10:00)**

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Deputy Chief Executive (S151) presenting the Revenue and Capital Outturn figures for the financial year 2021/22 for both the General Fund (GF) and Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

The Corporate Manager for Financial Services outlined the contents of the report and explained that the general fund had an underspend of £29k and the HRA had an underspend of £67k. This was an excellent return and showed a good degree of financial forecasting.

The following key highlights were provided:

- Reduced levels of income due to the pandemic including car parks, leisure and business rates.
- The reduction in levels of Government funding received for the Council.
- Higher contract staffing levels due to sickness and unfilled vacancies.
- The significant grants provided by the Government which were passed onto residents.
- The movement of reserves remained 10% above the minimum agreed by the Cabinet.
- The Treasury position had shown a greater return than forecasted.

Discussion took place regarding:

- The two surgeries joining together in Crediton and the monies saved as a result of economies of scale.
- Excess income received over that budgeted for. It was explained that when the budget was set in February 2021, an assumption had been made that the effects of Covid would be waning, however, this did not prove to be the case. There were good news stories in the areas of Planning due to the housing market, in business grants, Public Health funding and an increase in recycling income.

- Concerns regarding the use of S106 due to this excess income. For example were S106 monies being used for specific causes rather than to top up holes in the budget and also what monies were being used to develop community infrastructure? It was confirmed that S106 monies were being used for specific causes. There was not a structural problem within the budget, greater recovery was expected as the effects of the pandemic subside and income was expected to return to pre-Covid levels.
- The Council had committed to building circa 160 properties in the near future and was on track to deliver this. An update would be provided to the next meeting on this.
- Voids: the arching intention was to bring properties back into use as quickly as possible. However, there were sometimes complicating factors preventing this. A detailed explanation had been provided to Members recently on this issue.
- The need for a Housing Needs Assessment which would be discussed by the Planning Policy Advisory Group shortly and a need for discussion on a specific house building budget line. It was hoped that this Group could monitor this going forwards.

The Group hoped that the comments they had made during the meeting could be fed back to the Cabinet and considered as part of any budget discussions.

Note: *Report previously circulated and attached to the minutes.

10 **PDG WORK PROGRAMME AND POLICY DEVELOPMENT FOR 2022/23 (00:55:00)**

The Group had before it a report * from the District Solicitor and Monitoring Officer setting out the role of the PDG including results of the residents survey and the current work programme.

It was explained that this was an opportunity for the Group to focus on the areas that fell under its remit and to specifically identify areas of work that it wanted to focus on bearing in mind the feedback from the residents survey.

Discussion took place with regard to:

- The need for an update on the provision for Gypsies and Travellers.
- The need for the Group to have sight of the Repairs and Maintenance Complaints Action Plan and the need to monitor this.
- It was explained that Gypsy and Traveller provision and the Housing Needs Assessment would be covered in an update on the Housing Strategy which would be provided to the next meeting of the Group. There was also a proposal to deliver an all Member briefing on the Housing Strategy.
- A need for a provision within the Corporate Plan to provide support to refugees whilst ensuring this could be delivered in a sustainable way.
- The importance of resident survey reports.
- The use of more 'remote' meetings to deliver briefings and discussion forums in order to cover these important issues and for only focussed discussion to take place at formal Group meetings so that information was not being provided for 'information sake'.

- Second Homes and Council Tax – it was explained that a briefing paper would be circulated to all members shortly. A repository would be created for Members where all such information could be stored over the coming months.

Note: * Report previously circulated; copy attached to the signed minutes.

11 CORPORATE PLAN MID POINT REVIEW (01:10:00)

The Group had before it a report * from the Chief Executive considering the progress against delivery for the Corporate Plan at its midway point. This had previously been presented to the Cabinet on 5 April 2022. Feedback was now being sought from the Policy Development Groups in order to inform an update to the Cabinet in July.

The Chief Executive explained that the Corporate Plan had been agreed just prior to the pandemic and therefore it was not as far along as originally hoped but that some progress had been made. He informed Members that it was now prudent to revisit the plan to establish what could realistically be completed in the time frame to 2024.

During the discussion that followed the need to include an aim to support refugees and residents generally experiencing hardship was identified. This had also been discussed at the Scrutiny Committee the previous day.

It was also reconfirmed that the Council could only continue to ‘lobby’ against Right To Buy, not many other options being available at the current time. However, this served as a good example for Members to think about what their priorities were and how best to be using available resources.

Note: * Report previously circulated; copy attached to the signed minutes.

12 MID DEVON HOUSING COMPLAINTS HANDLING REPORT (00:20:00)

The Group had before it, and **NOTED**, a report * from the Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing providing an overview of Mid Devon Housing’s (MDH) plan to implement and promote a positive complaint handling culture and drive service improvement through lessons learned from complaints, to Members.

The contents of the report were outlined with particular reference to the following:

- Complaints needed to be handled efficiently and lessons needed to be learned.
- Any landlord managing circa 3000 properties would have complaints at any one moment in time. The complaints made were common across all registered providers and were consistent nationally.
- This was the most scrutinised service in the Council.
- In the past year 171 complaints had been received with 55 being upheld. This needed to be seen within the context of thousands of repairs.
- Complaints reaching the final stage ended up going to the Housing Ombudsman. 5 such cases had occurred in the previous year, not all of these had been upheld.
- A performance update would be provided on a quarterly basis through the MDH update report to the Group.

Consideration was given to:

- How a small issue can often escalate unless dealt with very quickly or at least a plan of action being put in place.
- The relationship between the tenant and the landlord was a two way process.
- The need for this Group to monitor this area and receive regular updates.
- The new format of Neighbourhood Walkabouts was working extremely well which included close liaison with Police and other interested parties in a joined up approach which was able to solve issues 'on the ground'.

Note: * Report previously circulated; copy attached to the signed minutes.

13 HOMES FOR UKRAINE SCHEME (01:43:00)

The Corporate Manager for Public Health, Regulation and Housing provided an update on the Council's involvement with the Homes for Ukraine Scheme by way of presentation which included the following key highlights:

- Information with regard to the three Government schemes to help Ukrainians come to the UK.
- The funding available to Ukrainians guests and hosts to support the schemes.
- The timescales involved and some of the challenges faced in delivering the schemes.
- The Local Mid Devon Delivery Team and how this linked into the wider regional team.
- Current data as of 30 May 2022.
- The wraparound support available.
- Commissioned support from CHAT, Citizens Advice and the Devon Ukrainian Association.
- Risks involved with vulnerable individuals suffering trauma and the threat of exploitation.

Consideration was given to:

- How sad the situation was and the fact that elected Members wanted to do all they could to offer support.
- A request was made that the presentation be forwarded to all Members so that they could forward on the information to their Town and Parish Councils.
- The current amount of support being given by the Council was unsustainable in its current form. Officers were being drawn away from 'the day job'. Discussions across local and regional teams were planned so that a sustainable management of refugee programming could try to be ascertained going forwards. An update was requested for the next meeting.

14 IDENTIFICATION OF ITEMS FOR THE NEXT MEETING (02:21:00)

In addition to the items already listed in the work programme for the next meeting the Group requested that it receive an update in relation to:

- The Homes for Ukraine Scheme

Other requests made during the meeting would be covered in the reports already listed for the next meeting.

It was explained that because of the need to liaise with a Members Working Group on ASB, the Neighbourhood & Community Standard Policy may not come to the next meeting due to a timing issue. It was hoped that the Tenancy Standard Policy could be brought in its place.

(The meeting ended at 4.40 pm)

CHAIRMAN